

From T. A. Clark

AGE AND EMINENCE

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SELDOM has the popular mind been so deeply moved by the casual utterance of a savant as in the recent instance of Dr. Osler's now famous valedictory at Johns Hopkins. Nothing was probably more foreign to the speaker's mind than an intention to stir up the tumult of newspaper contention that followed his remarks, and we may presume that he is not altogether pleased at the exact character of the notoriety which he has achieved. The portion of his address that has brought him so prominently into the public eye had to do with the age of greatest usefulness in man, and runs as follows:

I have two fixed ideas, well known to my friends, harmless obsessions, with which I sometimes bore them, but which have a direct bearing on this important problem. The first is the comparative uselessness of men above forty years of age. This may seem shocking, and yet, read aright, the world's history bears out the statement. Take the sum of human achievement in action, in science, in art, in literature—subtract the work of the men above forty, and while we should miss great treasures, even priceless treasures, we should practically be where we are to-day. It is difficult to name a great and far-reaching conquest of the mind which has not been given to the world by a man on whose back the sun was still shining. The effective, moving, vitalizing work of the world is done between the ages of twenty-five and forty—these fifteen years of plenty, the anabolic or constructive period, in which there is always a balance in the mental bank, and the credit is still good. . . .

My second fixed idea is the uselessness of men above sixty years old, and the incalculable benefit it would be in commercial, political and in professional life if, as a matter of course, men stopped work at this age. Donne tells us in his 'Biathanatos' that, by the laws of certain wise states, sexagenari were precipitated from a bridge, and in Rome men of that age were not admitted to the suffrage, and they were called *deponati*, because the way to the senate was *per pontem*, and they, from age, were not permitted to come hither. In that charming novel, 'The Fixed Period,' Anthony Trollope discusses the practical advantage in modern life of a return to this ancient usage, and the plot hinges upon the admirable scheme of a college, into which, at sixty, men retired for a year of contemplation before a peaceful departure by chloroform. That incalculable benefits might follow such a scheme is apparent to any one who, like myself, is nearing the limit, and who has made a careful study of the calamities which may befall men during the seventh and eighth decades.

The thoughts expressed in these paragraphs were much more fully elaborated by Dr. Osler in the delivery of his address, and we may

accept them as the basis of the controversy. It is plain that in the discussion of the second of the 'fixed ideas' the allusion to Trollope and the use of chloroform for the sexagenari was a bit of pleasantry and not intended by the speaker to be taken seriously. It has, however, proved too subtle for many a yellow sheet.

Yet it is just as plain that Dr. Osler in all seriousness believes that man's constructive period reaches its climax and begins to decline by the age of forty years and also that the world would be the gainer if all active participants in its affairs were at the age of sixty replaced by younger men. He does not, I take it, contend that men above that age are absolutely useless, but only relatively so. That is, for every man in service above the age of sixty, a better man could be found to take his place below that age. In considering this proposition it is inevitable that men, such as Gladstone, Bismarck, Moltke, Hoar, Rockefeller, Morgan and scores of others beyond the age limit, leaders in various activities, come to mind as refutations of his theories. Yet we must not forget that, according to the census, 6.4 per cent. of the inhabitants of the United States, or 4,871,861 persons, are beyond the age of sixty years, and that instances of aged leadership are comparatively rare—perhaps sufficiently so as to give some support to Dr. Osler's contention.

But it is the former of Dr. Osler's 'fixed ideas' that I wish primarily to discuss, the one expressed in the words that 'the effective, moving, vitalizing work of the world has been done between the ages of twenty-five and forty. We can not doubt that large numbers of thinking people are roughly of his opinion. Many corporations refuse to add to their working forces persons beyond the age of forty years, and a question recently taken up for serious discussion before a national body of educators was whether teachers did not as a class depreciate in effectiveness after the age of thirty-five.

It is not, however, through the expression of personal opinion that I can hope to add anything to the question, but through recourse to a considerable mass of data that I happen to have in my possession showing the age at which some thousands of Americans have received public recognition for services rendered. I refer to those mentioned in 'Who's Who in America.' Some years ago in connection with a study the purpose of which was to determine the educational preparation of those who had achieved the kind of eminence which mention in that book indicates, I made a tabulation of the ages of the nearly 9,000 persons mentioned in the edition of 1900. The names fell quite naturally, so far as vocation is concerned, into ~~two~~ twenty-five groups, the greater number of which—for men only—are given in the following



table, together with the number in each group, the median age of the group and the percentage of persons under the age of forty years.\*

Profession.	No. in Group.	Median Age of Group in Years.	Percentage Below Forty Years of Age
Actor .....	54	48	20.3
Artist .....	260	44	14.5
Author .....	528	54	19.4
Business man .....	200	63	2.5
Clergyman .....	655	59	5.5
College professor .....	1,090	47	22.0
Congressman .....	446	53	14.6
Editor .....	509	47	20.0
Educator .....	188	54	21.8
Engineer .....	284	55	9.8
Financier .....	215	64	5.5
Inventor .....	26	62	0
Lawyer .....	857	57	5.6
Librarian .....	362	50	22.6
Physician .....	540	56	11
Musician .....	111	44	33.3
Sailor .....	103	59	5.0
Scientist .....	146	44	31.3
Soldier .....	205	63	6.8
Statesman .....	202	55	8.0
	6,983	Av. 54	Av. 16

Although this table has a bearing upon the minimum age at which a certain sort of public recognition is given to achievement, in its consideration two things must be borne in mind; first, that many of those who were at the issue of the book over forty years of age performed the service which gave them prominence before they had reached that age; and, second, that there must always be something of a lag in public recognition, and in all probability many who had already performed service of importance had not yet been promoted to the ranks of 'Who's Who.' Yet, even with these qualifications, the figures are not without their bearing upon the question of the minimum age at which important public service is rendered, for without doubt achievement of the first rank is not slow of recognition. And the thing which must strike one most forcibly in any inspection of the table is the comparatively few men under forty years of age. Of the 6,983 men, the median age is fifty-four years, while but 1,118, or less than one in six, were below the age of forty years. Stated in other words, this means that in the year 1900 out of a group of nearly 7,000 eminent men but 16 per cent. were within Dr. Osler's age period of most 'effective, moving, vitalizing work.' Although this fact can not be taken as disproving his conten-

\* The persons mentioned in the volume but not included in the group studied either formed a nondescript class so far as vocation is concerned or failed to give the date of birth, or were women and were tabulated separately.

tion, since, as has been said, a considerable number of the older men may have completed their important work at an early age, still it would seem to throw some serious doubts upon the truth of his generalization. At least the figures show that in a group of arbitrarily limited extent, *i. e.*, the size of 'Who's Who,' the young man in competition for a place is but a one to five 'shot.' But it is possible, through recourse to mathematics, to indicate approximately the age at which the service was rendered which secured admission to the book. To illustrate—of the entire number of 6,983 comprising our group, 86 were between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine years, the entire number having become famous during that decade of life. The probable mortality of that number of persons for the decade, supposing them to be good 'risks,' would be six. We may then suppose that 80 would enter the next decade. But our figures show that 922 of our entire group were between the ages of 30–39, inclusive, leaving the number 842 as representing the number of new names admitted during the decade. Of the total number for this age period (922), the mortality tables lead us to suppose that 78 will die before its completion, giving us 844 as the number passing on to the next group—that for the age decade of 40–49 years. Again we get the probable number added during the decade by subtracting the number thus admitted from the previous group, from 1,620, the total number of persons of the age covered by the decade and find the total number added for services rendered during the decade to be 776. In the same way, by using the continually increasing mortality rate and applying it to the number left over from previous decade-groups, we find the number added between the years 50–59 to be 376; from 60–69 years, 51. Beyond this point the computation gives us minus quantities for the number of persons admitted during each of the next three decades, indicating seemingly either or both of two conditions; first, that the mortality among these men of eminence is greater than that of the insurable risks upon which the mortality tables are based; second, that in the compilation of 'Who's Who,' the old men did not receive the recognition given to their younger confreres, thus reducing the size of these more advanced age-groups. Either one of these conditions would tend to bring about the statistical result alluded to, and on consideration we have reason to believe that both of them are active.

If the above reasoning is not fallacious, and if there is no great lag in the public recognition of achievement, we have a further refutation of Dr. Osler's contention that the 'work of the world is done between the ages of twenty-five and forty,' for we find the ratio of recognition for the several decades to be as follows:

20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69
3.9 per cent.	39.5 per. cent.	36.4 per cent.	17.6 per cent.	2.4 per cent.

From this we see, that although the decade from 30-39 shows the greatest productivity, it is but slightly greater than the next succeeding one, and that less than one half have made good—at least so far as public recognition is concerned—before the age of forty years.

Although these generalizations are for the whole group studied, irrespective of vocation, the first table shows considerable differences in the average age of those in the various professions and also in the percentages of those under forty years of age. This question was discussed by the author in the *POPULAR SCIENCE MONTHLY* for July, 1902, but I take the liberty of touching upon it briefly again.

It is noticeable that the musician distances all competitors in the race for distinction. This is not hard to understand when we recall the infant prodigies who frequently figure on our bill boards, or consider that nature has in most cases contributed more largely to his success than has nurture. Of those callings which presuppose a professional or at least an extended preparation, that of scientist seems from our table to promise the earliest recognition. This is perhaps due to the fact that with him the actual work of life is entered with a completer intellectual equipment than by most of the others, and that the period of preparation offers opportunities for research and original investigation which may bring renown even before life work is begun. This would also apply to the college professor with perhaps fully as much force and in a lesser degree to the librarian and the educator. These four then might be included in a class in which the period of preparation is extended, but for which work of a high order might be expected immediately on its completion and positions of some prominence aspired to from the start. Next in the race for renown come the actor and the author, almost neck and neck. If we conclude that nature had most to do with the musician's success and nurture with the educator's, we should be forced to place the author and the actor in a class in which these two forces divide the honors more evenly. No doubt one must be born an actor or an author to rise to a high rank, but after all, the making process is not to be despised as a factor, and this takes time. Except for the soldier and sailor, whose ability to rise to prominence, at least in time of peace, is determined by the rapidity with which those above him are retired from service, and the congressman and the statesman, whose minimum limit is prescribed by law, the rest of the vocations shown upon the chart fall, it seems to me, into a class for which the schools, as organized means of education, provide no adequate preparation, and for which that preparation must come to a great extent from the vocation itself. Thus the scientist, or even the college professor, who has devoted thirty years of life to study, can enter his profession from the top,

while the business man and financier for whom the accumulation of wealth is a desideratum, or the lawyer and the doctor who must command a practise, or the minister who needs a congregation, must with the same period of intellectual infancy enter it from the bottom and devote a few more years to the climbing process. In so far as the physician is an investigator, the conditions of the scientist apply to him, and no doubt the considerable number who are such accounts for the fact that his recognition comes earlier than that of his competitors in law and the pulpit. The surprising thing of the figures is perhaps the slowness with which the inventor gains a foothold in the ladder of fame. Not one of those mentioned was below the age of forty years, though the group is too small to give this fact much weight.

Although women are not included in the table given, the study of those mentioned in 'Who's Who' shows that upon the stage and in musical circles recognition is much earlier for them than for men, while in all other callings it is slower. This would seem to suggest that attractiveness of person is at a greater premium with her than with her brother, and perhaps makes up for some other defects. When however this is outlived with youth, the struggle seems to be a hard, if not a losing one.











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